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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the construction and application of a framework to investigate control at the policy-making level in education. The minutes of the regular meetings of 21 school boards in British Columbia were analyzed for the period January to December of 1975. Construction of the framework involved (1) definitions of control and identification of common characteristics, (2) specification of control dimensions, (3) the importance of decision-making to control, (4) identification of three decision levels from research and learned opinion, and (5) consideration of what is controlled, namely, operational areas of relevance to educational administration. Application of the framework involved describing control in terms of emphasis placed on decisions and then examining those decisions and their relationships to several contextual variables. Some of the results indicated that the more decisions made by a board, the less important they tended to be; boards tended to place low emphasis on curriculum and instruction decisions; and boards with more trustees tended to make higher-level, corrective-type decisions in the area of finance and business management. One recommendation was to devote greater attention to structuring board agendas and eliminating inconsequential issues. (Author/LD)

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DESCRIBING CONTROL IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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THE NEED FOR A DEFINITION OF CONTROL

Control has been investigated in a variety of organizational contexts and from different perspectives. As early as 1941, for example, Holden, Fish and Smith investigated control practices in thirty one leading American corporations. Subsequent studies have concerned such points of emphasis as control practices in organizations (Villers, 1964; Deming, 1968); the "synergistic" nature of control (Tannenbaum, 1968); the effect of control distribution on organizational effectiveness (Bachman, Smith and Slesinger, 1969); and the effect of strategies of control upon organizational behavior (Child, 1973).

Educational researchers have investigated the relation of control to dimensions of organizational climate (Otto and Veldman, 1967), and to the willingness of teachers to adopt trusting attitudes (Belasco, 1972). Authorities on school boards in the Canadian context have addressed the issue of control in terms of control distribution, and have emphasized its political ramifications (Hodgson, 1968; Langlois, 1974; Cistone, 1975; Bargen, 1976). Discussions of control have addressed such questions as who controls our schools? How much control should local and provincial governments have? Do school boards really have control? These questions have little meaning unless we have a clear conceptualization of what control is and what it involves. The decision to approve the recommendation of a sub-committee, for example, is a type of control; so is the decision to spend $1½ million on a capital undertaking. The development of a policy to improve literacy and numeracy in a district respresents a type of control; so does the decision to have a padlock installed on a door, or the decision to get a janitor to erase obscenities from a school wall.

In short, the concept of control remains problematic, poorly defined and loosely employed. Little emphasis has been given to defining the elements of control at specific policy levels in the organization. In this regard Dauten, Gamill and Robinson (1958:42) have observed that control has long been considered to be "one of the least understood areas of management activity," Jerome (1961:42) has stated that "the word control has the serious shortcoming of having different meanings in different contexts," and Reeves and Woodward (1970:38) have pointed out how, in the literature related to organizational behaviour, "there is ambiguity in the use of the word control."

To be useful, material dealing with any subject needs to be organized within a framework of topics and subtopics. (Anthony, 1965:1). This paper represents an approach to the concept of control from the perspective of such a framework.

Three control elements "setting standards and objectives," "monitoring" and "taking corrective action" are given prominence in management theory. Luthans (1973:259) noted that control is sometimes mistakenly equated with only one of these elements. One might therefore question the reliability of studies which are based on the assumption that control has similar connotations for different groups and individuals.

The above-mentioned elements, together with a categorization of decisions according to level of importance, and an identification of operational areas, provide basis from which to define and describe control in education in more precise terms than general speculations as to "who controls what" have to date provided.

DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

Construction of a framework relevant to the investigation of control involved, first, the presentation of theoretical definitions of control and the identification of common characteristics; second, the specification of control dimensions frequently mentioned in the literature; third, the discussion of the importance of decisions as the sine qua non of control; fourth, the identification of three decision levels from existing research and learned opinion; fifth, the consideration of what is controlled, namely, operational areas of relevance to educational administration.

Definitions of Control

From an investigation of a wide variety of definitions reflecting classical, executive, systems and planning perspectives, the following points emerged as central to a definition of control:

- it is directed at accomplishing plans, objectives and specifications;
- it pertains to the examination and checking of performance;
- it pertains to the whole organization and rests heavily on executive orders and responsibilities;
- it involves action in the form of readjustment where necessary.

Control Dimensions

Certain characteristics have been given prominence in control definitions. Numerous writers have discussed these characteristics in terms of specific control dimensions and indicate (with varying emphases) that a threefold classification can be identified.

1. Setting Standards and Objectives. The establishment of criteria for performance and for results against which actual performance and results can be measured. This includes decisions which pertain to the setting down

of criteria of quantity, cost, time-use, or quality in a given task area. Related decisions include the establishment of contract terms, the setting of dates for programs, and the establishment of levels of performance.

2. Monitoring. The appraisal of performance against previously established standards and objectives. These decisions represent that aspect of control through which a board might check the activities of individuals and operations under its jurisdiction. This category includes the examination and approval of purchases, and the setting up of committees to investigate present practice.

3. Taking Corrective Action. The application of measures to adjust performance when it falls short of established standards and objectives. This involves the intent of bringing about improvements in an area where things are perceived not to meet given standards. Included under this category would be decisions to analyze a situation with the specified intention of correcting a problem. This might involve, for example, the rescindment of existing policies or decisions.

Decisions Levels

Decisions are the essence of control. According to Kast and Rosenzweig (1970:470), control is maintained by means of decisions which are made as part of an ongoing process. The "controller" has been identified by Eilon (1971:135) as a decision-maker, "since it is through his decisions transmitted to the system that he can adjust its performance and steer it along a desirable course". It follows that the level of a decision is important in determining the extent of control exerted. A categorization indicating decision levels is therefore relevant to the study of control in that it places the dimensions of control

in perspective with respect to their impact on the organization.

Several authorities have developed categorizations according to decision level. The following threefold categorization has been identified for the purposes of this framework:

1. Policy-Oriented Decisions. Decisions which affect more than one specific case or instance and become general rules. The term "policy-oriented" has been used to incorporate decisions such as those which involve major financial undertakings (capital budgets, borrowing on security, architectural contracts, purchase policy, etc.), and contracts with bodies of employees through collective negotiations.

2. Routine Decisions. Specific decisions usually governed by existing policies. Such decisions are concerned with the handling of specific issues and are based for the most part on guidelines and specifications set out as a result of policy-type decisions. This classification includes decisions involving individuals rather than groups, and the purchase of individual items rather than the consideration of broader capital and operational expenditures. The approval of hirings and resignations, the adoption of committee reports, and the confirmation or "rubber stamping" of the decisions of sub committees are also considered routine.

3. Residual Decisions. Decisions which have no acknowledged implication for the future of the organization. These are decisions of a fairly trivial nature such a the payment of a school bus driver's $10 rodeo fee or the reimbursement of a teacher for a phone call.

Operational Areas

An important consideration in the study of control in organizations pertains to the focus of that control.

In their 1941 study of organizational control, Holden, Fish and Smith referred to control over policies, organization, key personnel, wages and salaries, costs, methods and manpower, capital expenditures, and research and development. Miner (1971) described control over monetary resources, material resources and human resources. Similarly, Brown (1972:178) referred to a "socio-technical mix" in the control structure of any organization based on the principle that, basically, any organization will have both a technical system (pertaining to the layout of capital equipment) and a work organization (relating the people who carry out the tasks to one another).

Numerous categorizations of operational areas in educational systems have been suggested. One of the more recent and comprehensive is that provided by Gorton (1976), who identified "task areas" in education: (a) Staff Personnel; (b) Pupil Personnel; (c) Community-school Leadership; (d) Curriculum and Instruction; (e) School Finance and Business Management; (f) School Plant; and (g) General Tasks (Gorton, 1976:43-44). These operational areas provide the third basis for a description of control at a specific level in the education system. The overall framework, integrating control dimensions, decision levels, and operational areas is illustrated in Figure I.

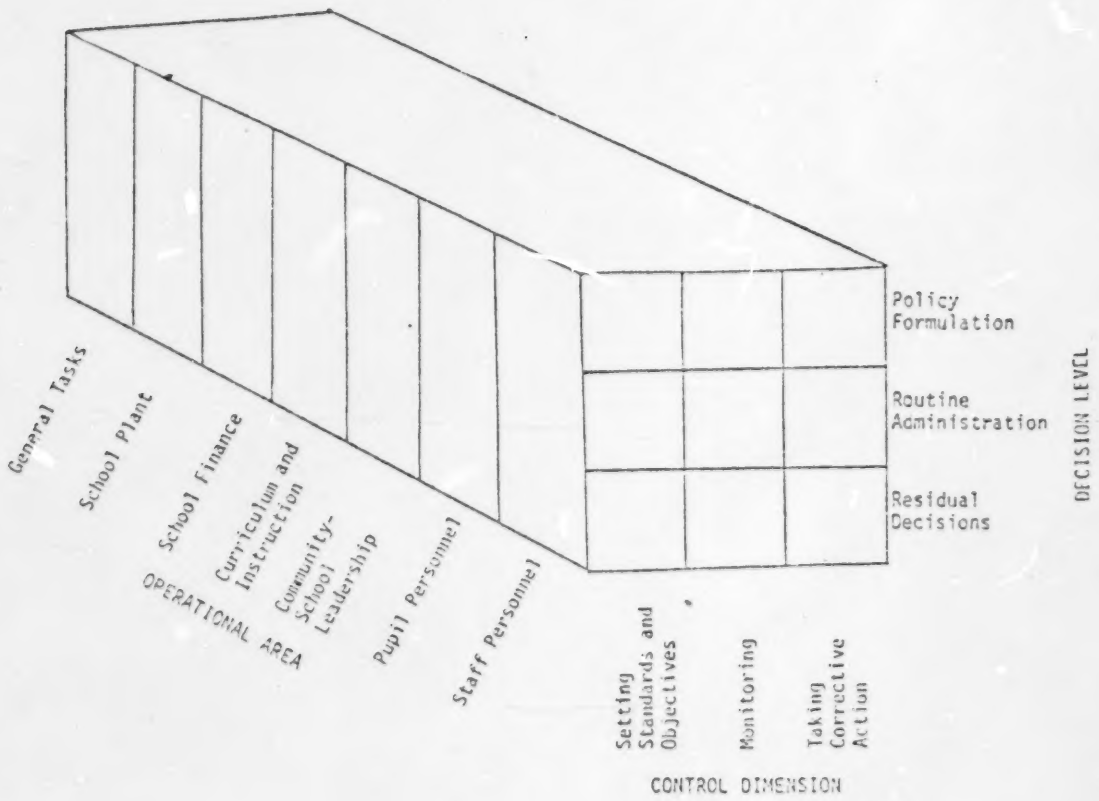

Figure I

FRAMEWORK FOR THE PREPARATION OF A CONTROL PROFILE

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

The application of the framework involved the analysis of decisions made by school boards in British Columbia. Twenty-five boards were selected by means of a random sample stratified on the basis of School District Size and Local Fiscal Effort.[1] Of this sample, 21 boards participated in the study. The minutes of the regular meetings of these boards for the period January to December 1975 were analyzed.

Two considerations were involved in the application of the framework. First, control was described in terms of the relative decision emphasis placed by boards on each component of the control framework. This pertained to a score calculated on the basis of percentage of total school board decisions. Second, relative decision emphases for these categories were examined in terms of their relationships to several contextual variables.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: DECISION EMPHASES

Emphasis on Operational Areas

Decisions relating to Finance and Business Management and Staff Personnel were made most frequently, while School-Community Relations and Curriculum and Instruction decisions were made least frequently. In fact, the latter area accounted for only 3 percent of the total 6,623 decisions.

Findings indicated that the boards in this study were concerned predominantly with decisions pertaining to finance, staff, and the general con-

[1] The amount of funding generated locally, expressed as the percentage of the total revenue for a district. The sum of local district taxation, plus tuition fees and miscellaneous revenue, including deficits and surpluses from the previous year constituted local revenue.

siderations which relate to their own operation. These three areas accounted for over 70 percent of the total decisions. Two reasons might explain this emphasis. First, these tasks might require greater consideration in school district operation than do others and, second, boards might consider these as areas in which they have greater legitimate jurisdiction. The latter suggestion might explain the minimal emphasis devoted by boards to decisions in the area of Curriculum and Instruction, an "interna" aspect of education recognized as a provincial rather than a local responsibility.

Emphasis on Control Dimensions

Monitoring decisions accounted for 57 percent of the decisions, while Setting Standards and Taking Corrective Action accounted for 30 percent and 14 percent respectively.

These findings seem to indicate that the boards in this study were concerned for the greater part with decisions which involved checking on activities under their jurisdiction particularly with regard to Staff Personnel and aspects of their own function. There was a strong indication, however, that this does not hold for decisions in every operational area. The greater emphasis placed by boards on Setting Standards in the School-Community Relations area suggests that these boards adopt a different role in making community-related decisions than they did in making decisions concerning Staff Personnel. A more even distribution in the area of Finance and Business Management indicates that perhaps boards found it as necessary to set standards and take corrective action in this area as they did to monitor performance.

Emphasis on Decision Levels

Routine Administrative decisions accounted for 82 percent, Policy-Oriented

decisions accounted for 15 percent, and Residual decisions accounted for 4 percent of the total number of decisions. Individual boards did not vary considerably from this general pattern. In addition, it was found that Residual decisions were made most in the areas of Staff Personnel and School-Community Relations; boards frequently made more Residual decisions than Policy-Oriented decisions; Residual decisions were given very little emphasis in the areas of Curriculum and Instruction and Finance and Business Management; Policy-Oriented decisions were most frequently made in the areas of Finance and Business Management and School Plant.

Though the frequency of Routine Administrative decisions was fairly consistent according to operational area, it is noteworthy that boards seemed more inclined to make Policy-Oriented decisions when considering financial matters or school plant matters. Perhaps issues in these areas are more conducive to policy-level decisions. On the other hand, the inclination of boards to deal with residual-type decisions in the areas of Staff Personnel and School-Community Relations seems to indicate that they tend to handle matters in these areas which could perhaps be easily handled at a lower level in the school system, or at least outside the board room.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS

Several relationships concerning control and school district variables were examined using the findings described above. The contextual variables were School District Size, Local Fiscal Effort, Number of Meetings per Year, Number of Decisions Made per Year, and Number of Trustees per Board.

Contextual Variables and Emphasis on Operational Areas

An examination of correlations between contextual variables and the degree to which boards emphasized each operational area revealed the following tendencies:

- boards of larger districts, and boards of greater Local Fiscal Effort districts, tended to place greater decision emphasis on Curriculum and Instruction;

- boards of districts with greater Local Fiscal Effort tended to place greater emphasis on School Community Relations;

- boards holding more meetings in the year tended to place greater decision emphasis on School Board Business.

In regard to Curriculum and Instruction, it appears that (although this constitutes the least emphasized of the operational areas) relatively greater attention was given to this area by the boards of the larger districts and by boards of the more "fiscally independent" districts. Perhaps greater size and greater local fiscal effort provide boards with a greater sense of freedom to be involved in an area possibly recognized as the decision prerogative of "the administration" or of the Provincial Government. If responsibility for such decisions is delegated, then perhaps the more "fiscally independent" districts and the larger jurisdictions feel it more incumbent upon them to have more of an active say in Curriculum and Instruction matters.

The indication of a possible relationship between Local Fiscal Effort and emphasis on School-Community Relations is noteworthy. It concerns the argument involving the effect of financial considerations upon the maintenance of local interests and initiative in education. This finding, if substantiated

further, might add credence to the idea that less Local Fiscal Effort and greater reliance upon Provincial Government grants might be a move away from local community commitment.

The greater emphasis placed upon School Board Business as the number of meetings in the year increases seems to indicate that, as boards hold more meetings in the year, the greater emphasis they tend to place upon aspects of their own organization and the more they tend to deal with procedural-type issues.

Contextual Variables and Emphasis on Control Dimensions

Several possible relationships were indicated between school board contextual variables and the degree to which control dimensions were emphasized.

There was a tendency for larger districts to place less emphasis upon Standard-Setting decisions and to place greater emphasis upon monitoring activities. This addresses a need among larger districts. Having larger enrollments, and consequently more staff, larger physical plant, etc., these jurisdictions may need to emphasize the checking aspects of their responsibility to a greater extent than is possibly the case with jurisdictions of smaller size and complexity. This finding was not only the case in regard to total decisions, it also applied to decisions in the areas of School-Community Relations and Curriculum and Instruction.

Boards with more trustees placed greater emphasis on Corrective decisions, particularly in the areas of Pupil Personnel and Finance and Business Management. This suggests the possibility that the boards with more trustees showed greater inclination to make decisions of a corrective nature, which might not be undertaken by a small group.

There appeared to be an increased emphasis on Monitoring decisions in the areas of Pupil Personnel and School-Community Relations as Local Fiscal Effort increased. This may pertain to a need for boards to check facets of pupil-services and community-school interaction more diligently when financial commitment between the community and the school became greater.

It is also noteworthy that the more decisions boards made, the less they tended to monitor in regard to School Board Business and the more they tended to set standards. This finding could be indicative of a board's need to set additional procedural standards, governing its own activities as the volume of decisions increased.

Contextual Variables and Emphasis on Decision Levels

A noteworthy tendency concerns the relationship between the number of decisions which boards made in the year and the emphasis which they placed upon Policy and Residual level decisions. The indication was that the more decisions boards made in the year, the less they emphasized Policy level decisions and the more they gave relative prominence to Residual level decisions. Thus there appeared to be a point for the school boards in their decision-making at which productivity in terms of Policy level decisions decreased and the tendency to deal with concerns of a Residual nature increased. This was strongly indicated, not only in regard to the overall decisions, but also when individual operational areas were investigated.

Boards with more trustees tended to emphasize Policy-Oriented decisions to a greater extent in the area of Finance and Business Management. This provides additional support to the suggestion that boards with more trustees tend to make more decisions which might have greater system-wide implications.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Several recurring ideas emerged from discussion of the framework and its application.

1. The overall framework has provided an initial conceptualization upon which the description of control at a specific policy-level in education might be based. It has hopefully facilitated an examination of the type and degree of control exerted by boards in terms of the different facets of organizing for education at the school district level.

2. The type and level of control exerted, and the relationship of these to contextual variables, tend to vary according to operational area.

3. No attempt is made here to suggest that findings point to school board effectiveness or the lack of it. What has been accomplished has been a description of decision emphases and an examination of the various factors which might influence them. Emphasis on various decision levels or control categories can not be taken as a viable indicator of effectiveness without consideration of a multiplicity of factors and relationships at the school system level. For researchers to come up with a figure concerning emphasis upon Policy-level decisions and then to state that "policy-making has not been emphasized enough" or that "boards are therefore less effective" seems erroneous. More research is needed before such conclusions as these can be drawn.

4. A tendency which was common in decision emphases in all of the operational areas concerned the relationship between the total number of decisions made by boards and the relative emphasis which was placed upon the levels of decision. The strong indication in this regard is that greater "productivity" in terms of decisions (beyond a certain point) leads to a decrease in the relative

emphasis placed on Policy-level decisions and an increase in emphasis on Residual-level decisions. The corollary to this statement is that school boards preoccupied with making decisions "for decisions' sake" tend to be more preoccupied with "ad hoc"-type decisions of little implication for the purposes of the school system.

5. Emphases placed by boards upon operational areas in this study were generally in agreement with the findings of other research in the prominence which was given to Finance and Business Management, School Board Business, Staff Personnel and School Plant and in terms of the consistently low emphasis which boards placed upon Curriculum and Instruction decisions.

6. The tendency for "greater Local Fiscal Effort" boards not only to place greater relative emphasis on School-Community Relations decisions, but also to make those decisions with particular respect to Policy-Level Monitoring and Correcting in that area seems to bring those boards more in keeping with the suggestion that school boards are controlling bodies acting in the interests of their local communities.

7. That greater District Size and greater Local Fiscal Effort might be related to greater emphasis upon Curriculum and Instruction decisions seems to indicate that these two contextual variables might give boards additional "freedom" to become more involved in that "iterna" aspect of education, generally recognized as predominantly a provincial government prerogative.

8. School board decision emphases seem to be predominantly oriented toward Routine-Level Monitoring activities.

9. There appears to be a tendency for boards with more trustees to make higher-level and more corrective-type decisions particularly in the area of Finance and Business Management.

Recommendations

1. A major recommendation concerns school board utilitzation of time and effort. More decisions tend only to foster increasing emphasis on residual matters. More volume of decisions does not appear to be conductive to productivity in terms of the utility of decisions. Perhaps greater attention could be devoted to structuring agendas in such a way as to eliminate the inconsequential type of issue. Perhaps, also, matters of minimal importance to the system need not be tackled by the board as these could be delegated to specific committees or to members of the administration. The effort to make more decisions does not, in short, appear to be a fruitful one.

2. Concerning the minimal control which has been exercised over Curriculum and Instruction in school board decisions, it appears that greater attention to this area by school boards is appropriate. Such attention need not be directed primarily at Policy-Level Standard-Setting or Correcting. Greater Monitoring activity would have utility, particularly at a time when Curriculum and Instruction continues to be an issue of some considerable public interest and public scrutiny. Perhaps it is time that school boards adopted a more active role in this respect.

3. Though the relationship between Local Fiscal Effort and the emphasis placed by boards on School-Community Relations requires further research, the issue of "local initiative" and the consideration of local interests in educational matters remains a concern of importance. Even with greater government funding of education at the local level, channels should be kept open for school boards to have that element of freedom to make decisions of local importance, such as those directed at the review, approval and implementation of locally developed curricula.

4. Policy-level control is vitally important to school systems, but generalizations pertaining to the extent to which Policy-level decisions should be emphasized can not be made to all school boards. It is recommended here, therefore, that boards should not be preoccupied with the extent to which they make Policy-level decisions. Of greater importance is the degree to which boards examine the quality of their own Policy-level decisions in terms of their value to their own school systems. It is noteworthy that very few of the decisions which were analyzed in this research pertained to "metapolicy" (policy concerning policy) or to the assessment of existing policy. Consideration of this would appear to be an important suggestion for boards in their decision-making activities.

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